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THE JOYOUS MIRACLE

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THE JOYOUS MIRACLE

BY

FRANK NORRIS

NEW YORK
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MCMVI

"I SAW *the man, the carpenter's son, and knew at once it was he.*"

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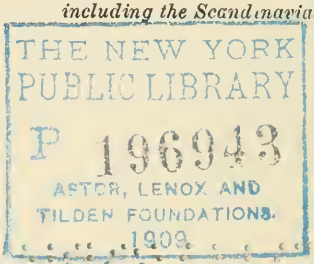

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MERVIUS HAD COME to old Jerome's stone-built farmhouse, across the huge meadow where some half-dozen of the neighboring villagers pastured their stock in common. Old Jerome had received a certain letter, which was a copy of another letter, which in turn was a copy of another letter, and so on

and so on, nobody could tell how far. Mervius would copy this letter and take it back to his village, where it would be copied again and again and yet again, and copies would be made of these copies, till the whole countryside would know the contents of that letter pretty well by heart. It was in this way, indeed, that these people made their literature. They would hand down the precious documents to their children, and that letter's contents would become folk-lore, become so well known that it would be repeated orally. It would be

a legend, a mythos; perhaps by and by, after a long time, it might gain credence and become even history.

But in that particular part of the country this famous letter was doubly important, because it had been written by a man whom some of the peasants and laborers and small farmers knew. "I knew him," said old Jerome, when Mervius had come in and the two had sat down on either side of the oak table in the brick-paved kitchen. Mervius—he was past seventy himself—slipped off his huge wooden sabots and let his feet

rest on the warm bricks near the fireplace, for the meadow grass had been cold.

"Yes, I knew him," said Jerome. "He took the name of Peter afterwards. He was a fisherman, and used to seine fish over in the big lake where the vineyards are. He used to come here twice a week and sell me fish. He was a good fisherman. Then the carpenter's son set the whole country by the ears, and he went away with him. I missed his fish. Mondays and Wednesdays he came, and his fish were always fresh. They don't get such fish nowadays."

"I'll take the letter you have," said Mervius, "the copy, that is—and my wife will transcribe it; I—I am too old, and my eyes are bad. This carpenter's son now—as you say, he set the people by the ears. It is a strange story."

Old Jerome put his chin in the air. "He was the son of a carpenter, nothing else. We all knew his people; you did, and I. His father built the bin where I store my corn, and some stalls in my brother's barn in the next village. The son was a dreamer; any one could have told he would

have perished in the end. The people were tired of him, a mild lunatic. That was all."

Mervius did not answer directly. "I have read this letter," he said, "this fisherman's letter. The man who looks after my sheep lent me a copy. Peter was not always with the man, the carpenter's son. One thing he has left out — one thing that I saw."

"That *you* saw!" exclaimed old Jerome.

Mervius nodded.

"I saw this man once."

"The carpenter's son?"

"Yes, once, and I saw him smile. You notice this letter

never makes record of him smiling."

"I know."

"I saw him smile."

"As how?"

Mervius wrapped his lean, old arms under the folds of his blouse, and resting his elbows on his knees, looked into the fire. Jerome's crow paced gravely in at the door and perched on his master's knee. Jerome fed him bits of cheese dipped in wine.

"It was a long time ago," said Mervius; "I was a lad. I remember I and my cousin Joanna — she was a little girl of seven then — used to run

out to the cow stables early of the cold mornings and stand in the fodder on the floor of the stalls to warm our feet. I had heard my father tell of this man, this carpenter's son. Did you ever hear," he added, turning to old Jerome, "did you ever hear — when you were a boy — hear the older people speak of the 'White Night'? At midnight it grew suddenly light, as though the sun had risen out of season. In fact there *was* a sun, or star — something. The chickens all came down from their roosts, the oxen lowed, the cocks

crew, as though at daybreak. It was light for hours. Then towards four o'clock the light faded again. It happened in midwinter. Yes, they called it the 'White Night.' It was strange. You know the followers of this man claim that he was born on that night. My father knew some shepherds who told a strange story . . . however.

"For the children of our village—that is to say, my little cousin Joanna, my brother Simon, the potter's little son, Septimus, a lad named Joseph, whose father was the olive presser of the

district, and myself — the village bleach-green was the playground.

"This bleach-green was a great meadow by the brook, on the other side my father's sheepfolds. It belonged to the fuller of the village. After weaving, the women used to bring here their webs of cloth to be whitened. Many a time I have seen the great squares and lengths of cloth covering the meadow, till you would have said the snow had fallen.

"It was like that on a holiday, when the five of us children were at our play along the banks of the little brook.

Across the brook was the road that led to the city, and back of us the bleach-green was one shimmer of white, great spreads and drifts of white cloth, billowing and rippling like shallow pools of milk, as the breeze stirred under them. They were weighted down at the corners with huge, round stones. It was a pretty sight. I have never forgotten that bleach-green.

"I remember that day we had found a bank of clay, and the potter's son, Septimus, showed us how to model the stuff into pots and drinking-vessels, and afterwards even

into the form of animals: dogs, fishes, and the lame cow that belonged to the widow at the end of the village. Simon made a wonderful beast, that he assured us was a lion, with twigs for legs, while I and Septimus patted and pinched our lump of clay to look like the great he-pig that had eaten a litter of puppies the week past — a horror that was yet the talk of all the village.

"Joanna — she was younger than all the rest of us — was fashioning little birds, clumsy, dauby little lumps of wet clay without much form. She was very proud of them, and set

them in a row upon a stick, and called for us to look at them. As boys will, we made fun of her and her little, clumsy clay birds, because she was a girl, and Simon, my brother, said:

"'Hoh, those aren't like birds at all. More like bull-frogs. *I'll* show you.'

"He and the rest of us took to making all manner of birds —pigeons, hawks, chickens, and the like. Septimus, the potter's son, executed a veritable masterpiece, a sort of peacock with tail spread which was very like, and which he swore he would take to his

father's kiln to have baked. We all exclaimed over this marvel, and gathered about Septimus, praising him and his handiwork, and poor little Joanna and her foolish dauby lumps were forgotten. Then, of course, we all made peacocks, and set them in a row, and compared them with each other's. Joanna sat apart looking at us through her tears, and trying to pretend that she did not care for clay peacocks, that the ridicule of a handful of empty-headed boys did not hurt her, and that her stupid little birds were quite as brave as ours.

Then she said, by and by, timid-like and half to herself, 'I think my birds are pretty, too.'

"'Hoh,' says Septimus, 'look at Joanna's bullfrogs! Hoh! You are only a girl. What do you know? You don't know *anything*. I think you had better go home. We don't like to play with girls.'

"She was too brave to let us see her cry, but she got up, and was just about going home across the bleach-green — in the green aisles between the webs of cloth — when Simon said to me and to the others:

"'Look, quick, Mervius, here comes that man that father spoke about, the carpenter's son who has made such a stir.' And he pointed across the brook, down the road that runs from the city over towards the lake, the same lake where you say this Peter used to fish. Joanna stopped and looked where he pointed; so did we all. I saw the man, the carpenter's son, whom Simon meant, and knew at once that it was he."

Old Jerome interrupted: "You had never seen him before. How did you know it was he?"

Mervius shook his head. "It was he. How could *I* tell? I don't know. I knew it was he."

"What did he look like?" asked Jerome, interested.

Mervius paused. There was a silence. Jerome's crow looked at the bright coals of the fire, his head on one side.

"Not at all extraordinary," said Mervius at length. "His face was that of a peasant, sun-browned, touched, perhaps, with a certain calmness. That was all. A face that was neither sad nor glad, calm merely, and not unusually or especially pleasing. He was

dressed as you and I are now —as a peasant—and his hands were those of a worker. Only his head was bare."

"Did he wear his beard?"

"No, that was afterward. He was younger when I saw him, about twenty-one maybe, and his face was smooth. There was nothing extraordinary about the man."

"Yet you knew it was he."

"Yes," admitted Mervius, nodding his head. "Yes, I knew it was he. He came up slowly along the road near the brook where we children were sitting. He walked as any traveller along those roads

might, not thoughtful nor abstracted, but minding his steps and looking here and there about the country. The prettier things, I noted, seemed to attract him, and I particularly remember his stopping to look at a cherry-tree in full bloom and smelling at its blossoms. Once, too, he stopped and thrust out of the way a twig that had fallen across a little ant heap. When he had come opposite us, he noticed us all standing there and looking at him quietly from across the brook, and he came down and stood on the other bank and asked us for

a drink. There was a cup in an old bucket not far away that was kept there for those who worked on the bleach-green. I ran to fetch it, and when I had come back he, the carpenter's son, had crossed the brook, and was sitting on the bank, and all the children were about him. He had little Joanna on his knee, and she had forgotten to cry. He drank out of the cup I gave him, and fell to asking us about what we had been doing. Then we all cried out together, and showed him our famous array of clay peacocks."

"And you were that familiar with him?" said old Jerome.

"He seemed like another child to us," answered Mervius. "We were all about him, on his shoulders, on his knees, in his arms, and Joanna in his lap — she had forgotten to cry.

" 'See, see my birds,' she said. I tell you she had her arms around his neck. 'See, they said they were not pretty. They are pretty, aren't they, quite as pretty as theirs?'

" 'Prettier, prettier,' he said. 'Look now.' He set our little clay birds before him in a row. First mine, then

Simon's, then those of Joseph and of Septimus, then one of little Joanna's shapeless little lumps. He looked at them, and at last touched the one Joanna had made with his finger-tip, then — Did you ever see, when corn is popping, how the grain swells, swells, swells, then bursts forth into whiteness? So it was then. No sooner had that little bird of Joanna, that clod of dust, that poor bit of common clay, felt the touch of his finger than it awakened into life and became a live bird — and white, white as the sunshine, a beautiful little white bird that flew

upward on the instant, with a tiny, glad note of song. We children shouted aloud, and Joanna danced and clapped her hands. And then it was that the carpenter's son smiled. He looked at her as she looked up at that soaring white bird, and smiled, smiled just once, and then fell calm again.

"He rose to go, but we hung about him and clamored for him to stay.

"'No,' he said, as he kissed us all, 'I must go, go up to the city.' He crossed the brook, and looked back at us.

"'Can't we go with you?'

we cried to him. He shook his head.

"'Where I am going you cannot go. But,' he added, 'I am going to make a place for just such as you.'

"'And you'll come again? we cried.

"'Yes, yes, I shall come again.'

"Then he went away, though often looking back and waving his hand at us. What we said after he had gone I don't know. How we felt I cannot express. Long time and in silence we stood there watching, until his figure vanished around a bend

in the road. Then we turned and went home across the bleach-green, through the green aisles between the webs of white cloth. We never told what had happened. That was just for ourselves alone. The same evening we heard of a great wonder that had been worked at a marriage in a town near by, water turned to wine, and a little later another, a man blind from his birth suddenly made to see. What did we care? He had not smiled upon those others, those people at the marriage, that crowd in the

market-place. What did we care?"

. . . .

Mervius stopped, and slipped his feet back into his sabots, and rose. He took the letter from Jerome, and put it in the pocket of his blouse.

"And you saw that?"

Mervius nodded, but old Jerome shook his head in the manner of one who is not willing to be convinced.

"He was a dreamer with unspeakable pretensions. Why, his people were laboring folk in one of the villages beyond the lake. His father

was a carpenter and built my corn-bin. The son was a fanatic. His wits were turned."

"But this thing I saw," said Mervius at the door. "I saw it, who am speaking to you."

Jerome put his chin in the air.

" . . . A dreamer . . . We were well rid of him. . . . But I was sorry when Peter went away . . . Mondays and Wednesdays he came, and his fish were always fresh."